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THE ANSWERER: WALT WHITMAN

BY EDITH FRANKLIN WYATT

I

THERE is a season of the year in the Middle West in late May when the spring ends and the summer begins, that always seems to breathe with especial freshness the sense of continuing change in the ways of nature. Lilac-blossoms fall. Columbines first sway their delicate horns of pale scarlet and fawn-color. Visiting Graceland cemetery in Chicago I was stirred on last Decoration Day to see that the city graveyard was filled as never before with men, women and children. It was as though in the year since we had entered the struggle of the European War, the city's sympathies had moved not only forward to the appreciation of an international future, but back to a quicker understanding of our memories of struggle for democracy.

Soldiers and civilians, the bugled strains of far music, rising and falling to the pulse of distant drum-beats, the flags' clear white and crimson stripes and dark-blue star-fields fluttering against the turf under the delicately-leaved elm and maple branches, the crowds of people carrying the colors, and palm-wreaths and baskets of geraniums—all this quietly peopled scene of the city of the living seemed in an ineffable accord with the invisible spirit of the dead and of her "camps of green." If one could have chosen a time for the birthday of the greatest poet of democracy it would have been this very season: and it seems especially fitting that Whitman, the destined singer of our national hope, our dearest common purpose, should have been born the last of May a hundred years ago, in the age of a dream that was dying and one that was coming to birth.

From that time forth, in the decade following Water-

loo, to the present day, there has been a continuous, one might indeed say an increasing need for defenders of democracy. Whitman has of course many valuable and rewarding aspects: but it is in this aspect of the defender of democracy, the writer who has actually undertaken to be a responsible philosopher for our national social faith, that he has seemed to one reader, at least, especially valuable and rewarding in the last four years.

He replies to us with a wonderful adequacy not only in his lyric responses, but in *Specimen Days*, in *Democratic Vistas*, *Collect*, *Good-Bye My Fancy*, and *November Boughs*.

II

The reader of the history of this continent, from Las Casas' terrific picture of the slave trade in the West Indies in the Sixteenth Century, to the last New York and Chicago dailies, will be chiefly struck with its senseless disorder. Unkempt, disreputable, vast, the forces that have made our nation have always, it would seem, shambled forth in cosmic guise. Looking at them from a little distance we conceive of these forces, in the past at least, as clear-sightedly progressive, and moving forward, through dangers indeed, but in the manner of those conducting an intelligent and well-equipped surveying party. Seen closer at hand, not only Columbus, but Washington and Lincoln, appear in the character of scantily-provisioned voyagers over the Sea of Darkness, the harassed captains of a poor, mean rabble proceeding towards Shores Undreamed, the discoverers of continents they never realized in their life-times, and advancing to the air of "I don't know where I'm going, but I'm on my way."

We think of our Revolutionary ancestors as a formal, well-clad soldiery, in neatly-cockaded tri-corners. We think of the Revolution in terms of the clear-lined dignity of the Declaration of Independence. We think of the Civil War in terms of the profound common, national sympathy of the Gettysburg address. But on reading Lord Charnwood's *Lincoln* we perceive that the pulse of common national sympathy was so thin, feeble and uncertain that it is amazing the Union ever squeezed through—a circumstance that appears less a result, than

a species of miracle; and we realize how long it is that we have been shambling forth, when we learn that our ancestors fought naked, at the battle of Eutaw Springs, with moss fastened around them to prevent abrasion from their powder flasks and muskets.

What is to be said about the desperate courses, and the casual ways, the inconsistencies and worthlessness, in which democracy seems to have lumbered along? Who will attempt the impossible feat of account for our shambling cosmic guise? Whitman will attempt it. Much as he determined to visit the soldiers, Northern and Southern, cared for in the Washington hospitals in the Civil War, Whitman goes forth to re-assure. He will not minimize difficulties. He will not conceal the event of battle. But he will bring you all sorts of encouragements little and large; and he will convince you, or perhaps one should say he will mesmerize you, into a frame of mind in which you

Know that the past was great and the future will be great
And that both curiously conjoint in the present time.

You are able to consider your own time and your own government in a larger manner; and to look around you and see that

The sun and stars that float in the open air;
The apple-shaped earth and we upon it—surely the drift of them is something grand!

Whitman in *Specimen Days* has a great deal to say about what seems to many persons, to more persons far than in his time, the most serious danger for democracy—the growth of plutocratic ideals.

Whitman has plenty of direct opposition to plutocracy:

Beneath the whole political world, what most presses and perplexes to day, sending vastest results affecting the future is not the abstract question of democracy, but of social and economic organization, the treatment of working-people by employers and all that goes along with it—not only the wages-payment part, but a certain spirit and principle, to vivify anew these relations; all the questions of progress, strength, tariffs, finances, etc., really evolving themselves more or less directly out of the Poverty Question, ("the science of Wealth," and a dozen other names are given it, but I prefer the severe one just used.)

The American Revolution of 1776 was simply a great strike, successful for its immediate object—but whether a real success judged by the scale of the centuries, and the long-striking balance of time, yet remains to be settled. The French Revolution was absolutely a

strike and a very terrible and relentless one, against ages of bad pay, unjust division of wealth-products, and the hoggish monopoly of a few, rolling in superfluity, against the vast bulk of the work-people, living in squalor.

If the United States like the countries of the Old World are to grow vast crops of poor, desperate, dissatisfied, nomadic, miserably-waged populations, such as we see looming upon us of late years—steadily, even if slowly, eating into them like a cancer of lungs or stomach—then our republican experiment, notwithstanding all its surface successes, is at heart an unhealthy failure.

The music-makers and dreamers of dreams wandering by lone sea-breakers, walking by desolate streams, are the builders and makers of the world, no doubt, as much as O'Shaughnessy pleases. They are not, however, the makers of the world's immediate programmes and time-tables. Swinburne's really intense passion for the serene republic has a detachment from reality that cannot but seem whimsical. Whitman's deep devotion to democracy is by no means detached; but it is unfocussed. In spite of his drawing an unascertained picture of plutocracy, in spite of his liking for a species of idealized sketch of "workers" as mainly brawny athletes, and his pleasure in his obvious conception of industrial occupation as an almost therapeutic field for the development of health and energy, yet Whitman knew democracy at first-hand, saw its faults and dangers and did not minimize them.

But he dislikes to be definite about what is to be done next. It is amusing to observe his friends' vain struggles to obtain a programme from him. He will visit you in the hospital: but he will not act as the doctor. He is a wonderful nurse for democracy; but he refuses the responsibility for ordering prescriptions.

This element of the quiet friend of humanity in Whitman's nature, an element doubtless partly of Quaker strain, is one of his greatest attributes. His social philosophy here, his inspired service in the Civil War—that volunteer care of his which he says was the very centre and circumference of his being, and worth shattering his health for—was a thrilling prophecy of a tremendous national phenomenon. I mean of course the vast, long-continued national energy that has poured increasingly into the wide field of social services in our own life-time. The very tempo, the very mood of his hospital days is immeasurably repeated, the mood of a worker who

combines support and relief with a liking for economic justice, and who cannot prescribe, can only work on through the need of a sea of individuals, step by step, one by one—the way of a thoughtful stretcher-bearer who ministers with a constant sense of the inadequacy of his ministrations in wretched miseries.

For Whitman no one in need is trifling, or obscure, or negligible or to be left out—not one. The soul of each person is identified to him as though he had been that soul's creator. Its passage through existence is sacred to him with homely splendor. No metric poem the Answerer ever wrote is more poetic than his tale of his hospital days; none more serenely lit with the divine fire of a passion for individual creatures, individually seen but multitudinous; none more finely swept with the music that knows the Universe as "roads for travelling souls."

Perhaps just this understanding, this knowledge that none must be forgotten, this pride for the obscured, could we but learn it wisely, is the contribution of our continent to civilization—a gift to the hold of time more different from Roman roads or Egyptian Pyramids than we had ever guessed.

Whitman's own hand wrote the inspired chronicle of his hospital service that replies by the divine law of indirections to so many questions about our national experiment. About the questions of the danger of plutocratic standards he has given us also some hints for whose preservation we owe a debt of gratitude to the faithfulness of his devoted friend Horace Traubel.

The record of Whitman's Camden years tells the story of a man who knew how to be poor, with a species of grandeur. The tale of these years has a faery element, the attraction of some classic symbol of divine power existent in nature, the subtle charm of a Lempriere fable.

Whitman in his blue cape, his beautiful silver hair, his exquisite cleanliness, sits like a god in his shabby room, with no money, no wide acceptance or successful literary career in a certain sense, almost no physical strength left. None of these circumstances are material. The whole scene is like that of Jupiter's and Mercury's visit in the cottage of Philemon and Baucis. This sojourn of an immortal in a homely habitation is an irresistible episode. The fact that the immortal often behaves in as un-god-like

a manner as Jupiter did, does not detract from his divine characteristics; and even seems to add a touch almost of grand opera comedy. The bragging and boasting; the firm calm of the great poet's concealment from his friends of just how much money he possessed; his majestic, impressive comment on books he had not read or even seen; his rating of works of genius in proportion to their authors' regard for *Leaves of Grass*; his divine nonchalance; his ineffable candor combined with his striking capacity for a species of placid, humorous trickery, something in him like Proteus, or even, if you will, like Autolycus—all these give the world a portrait of an impoverished poet which upsets all expectation and precedent.

Sometimes he sat in a chair on the sidewalk in front of his house; sometimes received callers in a room downstairs where he had great piles of unsold copies of his books. At the period when his lameness increased, admirers clubbed together and obtained a horse and buggy for him. Friends were fond of bringing him cookies. Lord Houghton and John Morley came to see him here in Camden, and Frank R. Stockton and Mr. John Burroughs, Mr. Doyle, the poet's railroad-conductor friend—all sorts of people. Towards the end of his life, Mr. Bliss Perry tells us, "Visitors were shown to the large upper room where the poet usually sat in a stout oak chair by one of the windows, a gray wolf-skin flung over the back of the chair." It was a littered low-ceilinged room strewn with papers in "a mean house upon an unlovely street. Trains jangled and roared at a railroad crossing not far away; when the wind sat in a certain quarter there was a guano factory to be reckoned with. The house was hot in summer and had no furnace for the winter months."

Here the Good Gray Poet lived for the last eight years of his life in high content and much spontaneous conversation, surrounded by innumerable kindnesses and friendlinesses and visited by hundreds of persons most of whom, like Dr. Bucke, were "Almost amazed by the beauty and majesty of his person and the gracious air of purity that surrounded and permeated him," and by his presence, which "seemed to take on a dignity and beauty as of some heroic, vanished epoch."

Such was the Answerer's final response to existence. The whole manner of his last years said as much on the

subject of democratic and plutocratic ideals as all his books. It said these things in that persuasive way he has described so completely:

Logic and sermons never convince;
The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul.

III

But Whitman had many fine, poetic and suggestive things to say in words, too, in his Camden years. He said: "Any love that involves slavery is a false love—any love." He said "The best part of any man is his mother."

Henry Adams observes in his distinguished and absorbing *Education* that asking himself whether he knew of any American artist who had ever insisted on the power of sex, as every classic had always done, he could think only of Walt Whitman; Bret Harte, as far as the magazines would let him venture; and one or two painters.

It is not too much to say that if Whitman's art treats this great subject with classic frankness, it adds a touch of greatness of its own in its expression of democracy in sex. In the pages indeed of both Bret Harte and Whitman social morality for men and for women is exactly the same. What Bret Harte says in the parting of John Oakhurst from the Duchess in the face of death, is what Whitman sings when he says that a man's strength is sacred and a woman's strength is sacred.

No matter who it is, it is sacred.

He hates sin. He is by no means among those who believe there is no such thing. He will confess his own—

You degradations—you tussle with passions and appetites
and the toil of painful and choked articulations—mean-
nesses, shallow tongue-talks at tables (his tongue the
shallowest of any)—broken resolutions. He will recognize
sin. He will blame it. But he will not cast out sinners.
Especially he will have nothing to do with a philosophy
that casts out only such sinners as are women.

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man;
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man;

The beauty of Whitman's expression of democracy in sex would alone rank him as a great contributor to civilization, a great poet in the sense in which Sophocles and Bunyan are great poets.

Henry Adams has much to say in his chapter on "The Dynamo and the Virgin" about the failure of our world to face the truths of nature that the Western World expressed for centuries in the worship of the Virgin as an avatar of the distinctive force of woman, whether economized or developed.

The highest energy ever known to man, the creator of four-fifths of his noblest art, exercising vastly more attraction over the human mind than all the steam-engines or dynamos ever dreamed of: and yet this energy was unknown to the American mind.

He excepts Whitman from this ignorance: but the spiritual power and genius in this respect of such a poem as

Unfolded out of the justice of the woman, all justice is unfolded,
Unfolded out of the sympathy of the woman is all sympathy

is forgotten even by such a penetrating critic of moral values as Emerson, in the endless question of the moral expediency of frankness on the subject of sex.

Without attempting to answer that question, one may be grateful to Whitman for the dignity of his moral intention in all he says on that topic. It is a curious circumstance that the two poets of genius in our tongue, immediately preceding him, who have most to tell us of this aspect of life, can say almost nothing about it without a leer. Both Byron and Burns are of the manners of a prolonged Eighteenth Century sentimentalism as alien as possible from the knowledge that understands that "any love that involves slavery is a false love." They were both, indeed, professional enslavers. Burns at times, it is true, is humble and honest. But mostly he is the "boastful, libertine bag-man" of Stevenson's detestation. Byron has hardly more depth on the subject of the relations of men and women than the "red-blooded man" of Bernard Shaw's satire.

This I think is what Whitman means when he says in an otherwise warmly laudatory appreciation that Burns is "weak and worse than weak"; and of Byron that his poetry is "introverted"—"not at all the fitting, lasting song of a grand serene free race." Whitman remarks elsewhere, with a severity that might confuse, that the verses of Poe are "almost without the first sign of moral principle." But in the sense in which Whitman uses the term morality, it is really true that it hardly occurs in the inspired poetry of the author of *To One in Paradise*. It has no comment to make on the economy or development of

sex, nothing whatever to say about what is wise or unwise in this regard, or cowardly or courageous or right or wrong. Neither has the work of Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier or Bryant. No one blames any of these poets for not choosing topics other than those his own genius had assigned. Yet it is certainly a merit of Whitman's poetry that without evasions or Druidical superstitions it placed the subject of sex before the world with candor as a great social and moral theme.

It is needless perhaps to remark that an individual of no worthiness as a human creature may be able as an artist to present the world with creative discriminations of the highest usefulness. It may not be superfluous to point out that echoes of a poet's life often qualify the tones of his poetry and make one understand them more clearly. The fact that Burns took care of his illegitimate child in his own house; Byron's misguided but responsible concern for his natural daughter Allegra, and his grief at her death—these are circumstances that make much these poets have sung more a matter of a fashion of eighteenth century coxcombry and less a personal conviction of the poets themselves than before one knew of them.

It is not quite fair to leave these circumstances out in considering their detestable attitude towards sex; and it is not quite fair in considering Whitman's splendid assertions of the responsibilities of parenthood to eliminate an episode that invalidated for some people the sincerity of his poetry. Mr. Bliss Perry says "The controversy over Whitman's writings has inevitably raised certain questions as to his own conduct." When John Addington Symonds first read *Calamus* it seems he was troubled by some lines about which he wrote to Whitman.

Shocked at a misinterpretation of which he had not dreamed, Whitman wrote frankly in reply concerning his own early relations with women:—"My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South, etc., have been jolly bodily, and doubtless open to criticism. Though unmarried I have had six children—two are dead—one living Southern grandchild, fine boy, writes to me occasionally—circumstances (connected with their fortune and benefit) have separated me from intimate relations." When this letter was first made public, many of Whitman's staunch friends of the later fifties and the sixties refused to credit its

statements, preferring to believe that the old man had been romancing. But it had long been known to a smaller group of his Camden friends that Whitman was the father of children, and that he had been visited in his old age by a grandson. To one of these friends he promised while on his death-bed to tell the whole story, but the time for explanation never came. . . . In our ignorance of all the precise facts concerned in these early entanglements we may wisely bear in mind some traits of his character about which there is no reasonable doubt. One of these traits was an unfailing respect for women. . . . The long and bitter controversy over the decency of a few of his poems has led many critics to assume that they were dealing with a libertine. But diligent inquiry among Whitman's early associates has never produced any evidence that he was known to be a companion of dissolute women. What woman or women bore his children, what unforeseen tides of passion or coils of circumstance swept and encircled him for a while, may never be known.

It is somehow impossible to believe Whitman capable of prolonged mean irresponsibility, deceit, unkindness and worthlessness to women and to children whom he loved intimately. You can only feel here concerning this story and the dreams and beauty of his poetry that you are in a mist of ignorance where the rest is silence. Besides, an air of American myth persists about it. There is something in it at once clear and yet blind and unbelievable like the Peruvian history of the Inca Huayna, of whom Garcilasso relates that he had "from two to three hundred enumerated children."

Truthfulness compels one to add concerning Whitman and his relations to women in poetry and in life something that may perhaps be more obvious to a woman reading *Specimen Days* and his Camden biography than to a man. You agree so fully with all his poetic belief in Woman that you regret exceedingly an unescapable perception that in his daily conversation he shows every mark of a man who knows almost nothing at all about individual women: and has never known many or perhaps any of them very well. This is especially apparent in his moments of closest observation on the topic—as for instance when he says with an air of discovery possible to keen and thoughtful penetration that "women can have capital times among

themselves, with plenty of wit, lunches, jovial abandon." Yet you cannot feel that you would have even this trait, this agreeable, dulled brightness and unfocussed conception of his changed; and it has something thoroughly pleasurable about it, like all his other discriminations large and little.

IV

Whitman's answers about how democracy must proceed by a march in the ranks hard-pressed and the road unknown; about the poetry of openways; of common service for multitudes; about how to live your own life, whatever yours means; about sex, and the native powers of women—these fine replies are all to be heard in the human conversation of Whitman's non-lyric writings, and of his life. Because less familiar, it is to the speaking voice of the Answerer that I have turned for them. But in all except some of the lesser turns of his thought, these truths are all given also in that great singing voice of his which is a national glory—in the songs of the open road that tell you yourself is good-fortune; in the songs that grieve for bereavement down all space and time through the moody and tearful night; and comfort shame and wrong and sinning in their poverties, wincings, and sulky retreats; and rise and fall on forever as rain falls from the heavens and vapors rise from the earth, from the thousand responses of the heart never to cease. Here is the reply of the Answerer who has undertaken to be responsible for democracy. Better than any one might have hoped, it seems to me, he tells us what we are all here for; sings us songs that we can hear before they begin and long after they are ended. He says that they are for those to come after him: and we may believe indeed that this is true; and that the music he says he had always around him unceasing, unbeginning, yet, long untaught he did not hear, is not only for the Bravest Unnamed Soldiers of the past, but for those of the future.

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